Post 8/12/66

Gun Lobby Fires A Fearsome Volley

By Marquis Childs

IF THE pessimists are right, not even such a mild measure as the Dodd gun-control bill has a chance of passage. And this is the assessment after 17 persons were killed and 31 wounded by a mad man who assembled on the top of the tower of the University of Texas an arsenal for mass murder.

One reason for the pessimism of those who believe the uncontrolled sale of more than 2 million guns a year without any restrictions menaces order and stability is the fact that the propaganda tap has been turned on again. So powerful is the gun lobby that a flow of letters and telegrams can be organized almost overnight.

It is, after all, an industry doing an estimated $1.5 billion of business a year. The National Rifle Association, with its 750,000 members, is the grass-roots element of this lobby. Aside from individual memberships, the NRA has affiliation with 14,000 clubs. The multiplying effect is geometric when it comes to deluging Congress with protests. The Rifle Association is a nonprofit organization with third-class mailing privileges.

A less well-known powerhouse supplying the ammunition for the opposition is the National Shooting Sports Foundation. Members of the foundation include most of the biggest arms and munitions manufacturers in the country. Among them are DuPont, Hercules Powder, Smith and Wesson, Firearms International Corporation, Lead Industries Association. In the mixed bag, along with the corporate giants, are sports magazines, gun dealers and sporting goods associations.

ON THE impressive list, too, are major gun makers—Colt Industries, Remington Arms, the Winchester-Western Division of Olin Matheson—based in Connecticut. That is the home state of Sen. Thomas J. Dodd, the author of the gun-control bill. Under investigation by the Senate Ethics Committee as the result of charges contained in a series of columns by Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson, the Dodd name hardly helps the chances for passage of the bill.

Pearson and Anderson charged recently that because the bill limits the inflow of surplus military arms from abroad, it would benefit domestic manufacturers, including the Connecticut firms that have given Dodd support in the past. To some degree, this could be true. But it is also true that the bill puts fairly drastic limits on interstate mail-order shipments of hand guns, and there are other mild restraints on the traffic in arms.

The Dodd bill has been moving at a slow crawl through the congressional process for two years. Hearings were held, with witnesses testifying pro and con at length. If the measure is now sidetracked before it reaches the Senate floor, or if, in the more remote chance, it is defeated by a Senate vote, then the prospect of any control is put off to the distant future. Chairman Wilbur Mills of the House Ways and Means Committee takes the detached view that if and when the Senate acts, the House can consider what it will do.

When the revolt broke out in Watts a year ago, hundreds of citizens, both Negro and white, rushed out to buy arms. News accounts told of gun shops staying open overtime to accommodate a steady stream of customers. The impression was of rival camps arming themselves for something like civil war. Those guns are still secreted, and it can hardly be doubted that with another outbreak they would come out of hiding.

IN CALIFORNIA, Missouri and Illinois caches of arms—not merely rifles and shotguns but mortars, machine guns and bazookas—have been found in the possession of such fanatic groups as the Minutemen. They boast that they mean to use these arms to resist a "Communist takeover." Their definition of Communist is broad enough to cover anybody short of the John Birch Society, and even the Birchites may be suspect.

The argument of the gun lobby is like that of the auto manufacturers who say that an auto safety law will not keep drunken and reckless drivers from slaughtering innocents on the highway. The Dodd bill would not in all probability have prevented the mass murderer, Charles Whitman, from acquiring most of his arsenal.

But it is at least a first step, and this, of course, is why the lobby is so bent on stopping it dead at this stage. The fear is of a national gun registration law similar to those in almost every European country. Those laws, incidentally, have not inhibited European sportsmen, who enjoy some of the finest shooting in the world. Violence begets violence, and with an open season on every kind of firearm, the prospect is not a happy one.

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